

A Season of Hope

by
Brian J. McCaffery

Over the last week, the signs of spring have become ever more obvious. The willows and alders are displaying brilliant fresh green leaves, the birds are laying eggs, and the smelt have arrived by the bucket-load. In many respects, it is a time of abundance, a season of hope.

At the same time, however, it seems as if a cloud is hanging over us. Up and down the river, people are concerned about the fate of our king salmon and how the poor escapement in recent years might affect subsistence. Some people are worried, nervous, and pessimistic. And yet, even in the midst of all this concern and uncertainty, I still see reasons to hope, reasons to believe that through our collective efforts, we may be able to help turn things around so that our king salmon runs can be restored.

I find hope in the fact that so many people are now acknowledging just how serious the king salmon situation is. Yes, there are still some who haven't heard or don't believe the facts about just how poor our recent returns have been, but more and more people are coming to understand that our kings really are in trouble. Just as importantly, a chorus of voices is being raised from the mouth of the Kuskokwim to its headwaters, making it known that we need to *act*, that we along this river have a responsibility to do what we can to help bring the kings back.

I find hope in the fact that over 50 people participated in last week's meeting of the Kuskokwim River Salmon Management Working Group and listened to their discussions and deliberations. I find hope in the efforts of the Yupiit Nation as they come to grips with the salmon crisis and consider how to craft long-term solutions. I find hope in the discussions about intertribal fish commissions on both the Yukon and Kuskokwim. I find hope in the fact that over the last half-year or so, local managers for both the state and federal agencies have had constructive dialogue, conducted joint outreach efforts, and come to important consensus about required conservation efforts. Although any one of us might individually disagree with certain aspects of the plans and strategies developed by these various groups, I appreciate the fact that so many people are taking the issue seriously and seeking solutions, each in their own way. If we can avoid finger-pointing, if we can take personal, community, and regional responsibility for helping the salmon, I believe significant progress can be made.

In a special way, I find hope in the perseverance and commitment to conservation expressed by many of our upriver neighbors. Despite years of low returns, many of them are still willing to do whatever it takes to bring those kings back. I am inspired when I see them willing to sacrifice even more than they have already; their efforts plant a seed of hope.

It is my desire that, in a small way, the limited social and cultural harvest of king salmon planned for June may help this seed of hope to grow. Because the forecasted return of king salmon is so grim, we simply can't afford to allow a substantial subsistence harvest of king salmon this season. We do plan, however, to allow communities to harvest between one and a few dozen king salmon in order to show respect to both the subsistence tradition and the salmon themselves. We recognize that this will not be enough to even come close to providing what people would like to harvest for subsistence purposes. Rather, we are hoping that this community-based harvest will allow our villages to still maintain a tangible connection with the kings, even in a season of scarcity.

We look forward to working with the tribal councils in the weeks ahead to help administer this community-based harvest. In particular, we are hoping the councils can recommend a person in each village to serve as that village's community representative. That appointed representative will be responsible for holding the permit, identifying designated fishers, keeping track of the harvest so that it does not exceed the community allocation, making sure that the harvest is shared fairly among all community members, and reporting the results of the harvest on a weekly basis. We have heard loud and clear that the communities and tribes seek greater involvement in, and responsibility for, management actions. Thus, we hope that their participation in this season's social and cultural harvest might be an important step in that direction. If we can cooperate and collaborate on this effort, I have hope that we can accomplish even more together in the future.

On the tundra flowers are starting to bloom. If we look carefully, we'll begin to see the tiny blossoms on the shrubs that will provide us berries later in the summer. If we look carefully, we will see the caterpillars that will one day emerge into beautiful butterflies. And if we look and act carefully, our joint efforts to provide a small harvest of king salmon this summer may be recognized as yet another reason to believe that we are living in a season of hope.